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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 000417

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/FO, NEA/MAG AND IO/UNP
NSC FOR ABRAMS

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TAGS: PREL PBTS AG MO

SUBJECT: MOROCCO RENEWS AND BROADENS ALGERIA INITIATIVE

REF: A. RABAT 0378
1B. RABAT 0401

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Feeling good about progress in New York, Morocco renewed its call for better relations with Algeria on May 5, broadening its standing appeal to open the closed border in a quest for comprehensive normalization. MFA Chief of Staff Bourita confirmed Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri called in the Algerian Charge to pass a formal diplomatic note, calling for a joint meeting of Foreign and Interior Ministers as a first step. He verbally noted that Sahara could be off the table. The Foreign Minister briefed the press, in part to underscore that the initiative was personally blessed by the King, Bourita said. The Algerian Charge separately told us he considered the offer to be sincere. He had no formal response from Algiers, but allowed that gentle USG encouragement of a positive response could be helpful. We think we could also urge concrete Moroccan gestures, particularly in Sahara, that could help reinforce their sincerity and the initiative. It may also be worthwhile to consult with P-5 and "Friends" influentials.
END SUMMARY.

Reteooled Moroccan Initiative

12. (U) Broadcast media reported late May 6 that Moroccan Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri called in the Algerian Charge d'Affaires on May 5 to offer a broad initiative to improve relations. Following on a press release, the Minister briefed the media, underlining that the initiative built on Morocco's March 20 public call for opening the closed border.

This was now a broadened request to comprehensively review and improve bilateral relations. This should be launched by a joint meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Interior, to be held as soon as possible to address all pending bilateral issues. This is the immediate action item the GOM proposed.

13. (C) MFA CoS Nasser Bourita told PolCouns May 7 that the Moroccan proposal offered what the Algerians had said they were looking for, when they publicly reacted to the GOM's earlier public appeal that the border be reopened. In subsequent commentary on the desirability of reopening the border, Algerian spokesmen had referred to the need to

address all issues between the two countries. This, Bourita said, Morocco was now ready to do comprehensively, including practical items like academic exchanges, which would not require border opening to move forward. Fassi Fihri had verbally conveyed to the Charge that Algeria could take the lead on setting the agenda of the talks, all bilateral issues could be on the table and the contentious issue of Sahara should be put to the side. Bourita unsurprisingly commented that instead, the Sahara question could for now remain in the UN channel.

¶4. (C) Bourita acknowledged that Morocco accepted the indirect messages it had heard from the Algerians. The GOM recognized that the border issue was a sensitive one that could not be resolved quickly -- this initiative could become a process of growing engagement. He also specifically mentioned readiness to discuss the properties owned by Algerians that were seized here decades ago. (Note: This is an issue we previously informally had heard was an important element of their dispute, but one not mentioned formally in recent years by a competent GOM official. End note.)

¶5. (C) Bourita said that the GOM had also learned from the limited response to its previous public initiative. That is why the initiative was proposed in a formal diplomatic note (full text below). Bourita said the GOM again took a public approach, partly to quiet domestic voices who criticize any opening for their own purposes, such as USFP ex-chairman and Minister of State El Yazghi, who, by mentioning the Sahara, disrupted the otherwise positive atmosphere at the April 27 Tangier conference (Ref. B), but did not prevent close discussion between the Prime Ministers. The public announcement and MFA press release on the new initiative were delayed late enough in the day May 5 so that they did not make the news cycle until late May 6 for broadcast or May 7 for the press. Bourita pointed out that press release contained verbatim the operative text of the diplomatic note. He highlighted the fact that both diplomatic note and press release clearly referred to the "Government of His Majesty the King," to underscore to the Algerians and the Moroccan public the personal support of Mohammed VI for this initiative. Mindful that the high-powered Algerian Ambassador was back home, Minister Fassi Fihri had called him personally to brief on the proposal, a half-hour before summoning the Charge.

Algerian Diplomat positive -- Soccer flap defused

¶6. (C) Algerian Charge Boumedienne Guennad (strictly protect) told PolCouns he believed the Moroccan proposal was "sincere." While he did not have a formal reaction from home, he said that Ambassador Belkheir, after receiving his post-demarche briefing, had reacted positively. He allowed that a low-key USG intervention with Algerian authorities encouraging a positive response to this initiative could be helpful. In the aftermath of the meeting of Prime Ministers in Tangiers (Ref B), which featured positive discussion of non-Sahara issues, he was hopeful a process of direct discussions could be launched

¶7. (C) On timing, the Charge called the initiative opportune. Just a few days before, there had been a soccer match in Algeria between a local team and a visiting Moroccan Club that had been broadcast nationally on Moroccan television. When they played the Moroccan national anthem, the last line referring to God, country and King was dropped.

The Moroccan press, ever prone to sensationalism, made a mighty hubbub, charging a deliberate insult. Even the pro-palace Le Matin, which should have been more responsible, exploited this, Guennad regretted. And the Moroccan Foreign Ministry had issued a release that it would ask in Algiers for an explanation. Thus, when he had been called in, without explanation, by the MFA, Guennad expected to be dressed down by the Minister, who did not mention the affair -- to the Charge's relief.

¶8. (C) In fact, Guennad said, he had a letter from the head

of the Algerian Soccer Federation claiming that the problem was the dropped line was missing from the CD provided by the visiting Moroccan team. Such were the longstanding suspicions between the neighbors that minor incidents like this could quickly blow up -- exacerbated by those who did not want to see improvements in relations. At any rate, at least, Fassi Fihri's demarche defused the soccer dispute.

Text of Proposal

¶9. (U) Embassy's informal translation of the text of the GOM diplomatic note passed to Algeria follows:

Begin text.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of the Kingdom of Morocco presents its compliments to the Embassy of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria in Rabat and has the honor to request it to transmit to the honorable Algerian authorities the following:

The Kingdom of Morocco reiterates its sincere commitment towards normalizing its bilateral relationship with Algeria, fraternal and neighboring nation.

The Kingdom of Morocco calls, once again, for the reopening of the land border between the two countries, closed since 1994, and the resumption of bilateral cooperation in its various aspects.

The Government of His Majesty the King expresses its full readiness to engage as soon as possible with the Algerian authorities in dialogue and consultations required for this purpose.

Morocco proposes a joint meeting be held of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Interior of both countries to comprehensively evaluate the state of bilateral relations, to consider outstanding issues and to determine, by mutual agreement, the modalities for an effective and sustainable revival of the relations between the two fraternal nations.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of the Kingdom of Morocco seizes this occasion to renew to the Embassy of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria in Rabat of its expression of highest consideration.

End Text.

¶10. (U) Press and public comment here has been generally positive, even from outlets often critical of the government, albeit with limited confidence some individual grousing at the prospect of rapprochement with Morocco's traditional rival.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: There are good reasons to be skeptical, as we were of the Moroccan appeal for border opening just after the March 2008 Manhasset Round. At that time, the fact that the appeal was made publicly, without a direct diplomatic approach, suggested it was principally a public relations exercise, although it did gain some positive reaction from some Algerians.

¶12. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: This time, however, after hearing the details from both the MFA and the Algerian Embassy it seems there may indeed be a potential opening toward the Morocco-Algerian rapprochement the USG has increasingly supported. We obviously defer to Embassy Algiers on the reception this initiative may receive there. Nonetheless, the Algerian Charge's point that USG encouragement of the Moroccan offer in Algiers could be useful, is one Washington may find worth serious consideration. Perhaps more senior engagement may be productive, or an offer of a venue, should a neutral one be desired. It also may be well worth consulting with the P-5 or the Sahara "Friends." We also believe the USG should ask the Moroccans now to make some symbolic gesture of sincerity

on the ground in Sahara, such as those suggested in Ref. B,
particularly on the human rights/impunity issues that were
successfully kept out of the UNSC resolution. END COMMENT.

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Riley